

Eve of the election: reflections from Election Experts

May 6 2010

One of the most interesting and unpredictable election campaigns in modern memory is now at its close. We asked our Election Experts for their reflections on the campaign, and their predictions for tonight and beyond.

Professor George Jones – LSE Government

The campaign was distorted first by the media stunt of the so-called “leaders’ debates”. It reinforced the false impression that we have a presidential system of government. It distracted attention from the teams likely to be colleagues of the future prime minister. It focussed attention on superficial characteristics of personality, like looks and charm, and skills in giving a theatrical performance, and not on programmes and policies. The “debates”, or rather the presentations, were not tests of the qualities needed by prime ministers. In the past Eden would have been a roaring success and Attlee a failure. Brown deserves to lose for being the first prime minister to agree to participate in such antics, and Cameron deserves to lose for calling for them, and ironically boosted the Liberal Democrats.



The second distortion was that the media and pollsters collaborated in focussing on the daily opinion polls and what they might show as the likely results in both votes and seats. This speculation demeans a major constitutional event in the life of a nation.

The third distortion is that the media and pollsters have shown their usual narrow perspective by neglecting the elections for local councillors. Local government services impact directly on citizens, and will bear the brunt of the “cuts” promised by all parties. Local government elections deserve better treatment.

Françoise Boucek – Department of Politics, Queen Mary, University of London

To my mind the tipping point in this campaign was the first televised debate when Nick Clegg, unknown to most voters until then, apparently managed to convince many voters, especially young adults who normally would not be bothered to vote, that it was in their power to change the nature of Westminster politics. To make this hope into reality on May 6th is a huge hurdle and probably an impossible dream. However, major realigning elections often result from tipping events such as this whose true impact only become clear post facto.



Dr Sara Hagemann – LSE European Institute

Cameron’s headache: The question of ‘Europe’ may become a real problem for a Conservative-led government

The latest predictions for tomorrow’s election have not given the Conservatives an outright majority of seats to simply assume that David Cameron can comfortably steer the country from a Conservative platform for the next five years. But all polls suggest that the Tories are leading in the campaign and that, if the Tories on their own fall short of a sufficient overall majority, they could be the dominant of a two-party coalition with the Liberal Democrats.



Now, opinion polls are of course one thing and elections quite another. The game is still on. However, one topic is likely to create quite a problem for an incoming government, particularly if it is a Conservative or a Con-Lib Dem coalition: ‘Europe’. So let’s go with the flow and

assume that Thursday does present us with a Conservative majority or a Tory-led coalition.

Cameron has made some grand-sounding promises of 'taking back powers from Brussels' and that he will make all new EU treaties subject to a referendum in the UK. How he intends to do the former is still undefined, but it would be easy to imagine – for example – that the EU's '2020 Agenda' targets for economic performance and the next round of the EU budget are opportune moments for the Tories to show they will put up a fight to 'secure visible concessions' for Britain's EU involvement. A number of EU policy proposals in the pipeline for the Autumn could also be used by the Tories to prove their more Euro-sceptic position in action.

However, the problem is that Cameron's more pragmatic Euro-scepticism lies miles away from many of his party colleagues and a good proportion of his voters – some of which are of an outright 'anti-EU' opinion. And here the Lisbon Treaty may all of a sudden reappear out of the shadows to put his leadership skills to a test at a very early stage: A number of agreements have to be reached between the EU governments in the coming months in terms of how the Lisbon Treaty is implemented. For example, the Treaty stipulates that the total number of MEPs must be 750 (plus the President of the European Parliament) and hence 18 extra MEPs must be appointed who were not elected in last years election as these took place under the Nice Treaty rules. The House of Commons will also have to make a number of decisions on Britain's involvement in the EU's Justice and Home Affairs policies. The required decisions could open up the rift between the anti-EU hardliners and the more pragmatic Euro-sceptics in the party.

So while Cameron's campaign promises on Europe were probably intended as clever and powerful rhetoric that would have few conflictual implications in practice, reality may be that the EU will have a great effect on the Conservatives instead. The economic environment and EU's policy agenda – including decisions on the Lisbon Treaty – do not leave time for internal Tory bickering on questions such as 'loss of sovereignty' to Brussels. But the Conservative party is certainly very divided over the topic of 'Europe' although this has been less apparent during the campaign.

Cameron's political leadership skills will only be put to real test after the election is over.

Tim Leunig - LSE Economic History

This election has seen me out and about in Brixton, in south west London and in rural Dorset. I have been struck by the way people are engaged. Out delivering leaflets in Surbiton, an Asda home delivery man wished me luck. In the Roupell Park estate in Brixton I was quizzed by a man about what would happen in the event of a hung parliament. When I got confused and delivered an addressed envelope to the wrong house in Shaftesbury, the lady came to find me, so that I could deliver it to the right person. There may be anger at some politicians, but I sensed no anger with the political system. People know that they have a choice, and they are thinking seriously about what to do. They know that the final outcome is up to them, and they are taking it seriously. Turnout will be high. Democracy is working, although the voting system is unlikely to. My election moment was overhearing an eight year old, out with a girl approaching her teens, walking a dog in North Dorset. They walked past a Bob Walter poster, and the boy told the girl how disappointed he was to learn that Bob was not about to become Prime Minister. This surprised me, as I don't think even Bob Walter's greatest fan sees him as Cabinet material. What had Bob done to so impress the boy, I wondered? It turned out that the boy was also called Bob, and thought it would be cool to share a name with the PM!



Dr Leandro Carrera – LSE Public Policy Group

A campaign for change; and change may come in the end

One of the most repeated aspects by the three main candidates has been change. Cameron has focused on the economy and the necessity to remedy what Labour has done wrong. Clegg has also focused his discourse on the economy, even though his ideas in this area seem a bit general and requiring further clarification. In addition, of the three candidates, he has made the strongest case for



the reform of the electoral system to get a fair representation in Parliament. Meanwhile, even though Brown has tried to prove that some of its most controversial measures, such as the bailing out of the banks, has helped to prevent an economic recession, he has also acknowledged the necessity for further change by for example, improving the efficiency of public services, making spending cuts to have a neutral impact on frontline public services.

With the most likely outcome of tomorrow's election being a hung Parliament, we may wonder if whoever will lead government will be able to achieve those changes with the speed that both the economy and the public seem to demand. Perhaps, even a minority government will set party preferences aside and be able to negotiate a package of measures in the right direction. What is certain is that such policies will take some time to be negotiated. It will be up to the public (and also the economy) to judge whether they can put up with political times.